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Pruning Deciduous Fruit Trees

With a minimum of care deciduous fruit trees are easy to grow in Southern California. However, without regular training and pruning, trees can grow into large and unmanageable trees and the quality and quantity of the crop deteriorates and the tree becomes impossible to harvest.

Deciduous fruit trees are pruned when the trees are dormant, generally from January 1 to February 15 in Southern California. Dead twigs and branches are removed first. While removing dead wood, carefully observe for any signs of disease. Diseased areas should be promptly treated to prevent the spread of disease to other parts of the tree. Pruning tools should be dipped into a disinfectant after each cut when pruning diseased wood. A good disinfectant is a solution of one part household liquid chlorine bleach and three parts of water. Suckers and watersprouts should also be pruned from fruit trees as they serve no useful purpose.

Newly planted trees need special pruning and training to develop attractive trees with maximum fruit production. To train a young tree, cut back the central leader when planting the tree (or as soon as possible after that) to a height slightly higher than you want the first branches to be. Allow three evenly spaced and strong branches to grow below the cut and one branch at the cut can become the new modified leader.

As with other types of trees, fruit tree pruning also requires that you remove any branches that rub together or branches that cross over. Pruning cuts should be made flush against the trunk when removing large branches and just above a bud on smaller branches. The use of asphaltic compounds on cuts is optional. Keep in mind when pruning that good fruit crops depend on getting good light and air circulation into the center of the tree. Concentrate your efforts on keeping the center of the tree open. Keep only three or four main branches for the framework of the tree and don't be afraid to prune the tree so it looks attractive in your yard. Deciduous fruit trees are beautiful as well as functional.

Thinning out excess fruit buds allows the remaining fruit to grow bigger with better quality. Usually after the fruit crop starts to form, further thinning of the crop will be necessary. Fruits should always be thinned so the remaining fruits do not touch each other and thereby allow plenty of air and light to circulate around each fruit. A general rule is to allow from four to six inches of space between fruits.

APPLES

Apples are formed on small twigs along the branches called "fruiting spurs." Apple trees produce many vertical branches and should be reduced by pruning the excess branches to open the center of the tree.

APRICOTS

Apricots are also formed on small twigs along the branches called "fruiting spurs." Each spur should remain fruitful for about 4 years. Heading back of branches tends to force the formation of these spurs. Pruning is necessary for good fruit production on apricots. If the tree tends to grow vertically, make your pruning cuts at outside facing buds to encourage horizontal growth. If the tree is too widely spreading, make your pruning cuts at inside facing buds and more vertical growth will result. This practice applies to nectarines also.

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PEACHES AND NECTARINES

Peaches and nectarines are probably the most vigorous growing of the deciduous fruit trees. The new growth will bear fruit the following year and it will bear only once so heavy pruning is necessary. You should remove about 2/3 of the growth each year either by heading back the branches 2/3 of the way or removing 2 out of every 3 branches completely. Usually a combination of the two works out for the best. This will thin the tree out considerably and also encourage good new growth for good fruit production the following year.

PLUMS

There are two kinds of deciduous plums grown in Southern California. Japanese plums are rapid growers and require severe pruning to keep them in bounds. Heavy fruit crops can easily break plum branches so ample thinning of the fruit is necessary. Prune away at least 2/3 of the new growth each year on these trees.

European plums tend to develop weak, V-shaped crotches. By always pruning them to outside buds, this problem can be alleviated somewhat. After the tree reaches maturity the only pruning that is usually required is to keep the annual shoot growth thinned out.

FERTILIZING AND WATERING

After pruning is completed, the tree can be sprayed with dormant spray for insects and disease. With the first sign of growth a good all-purpose fertilizer at the recommended dosage on the package can be applied three times during the growing season. Watering should be heavy and infrequent; allow to dry between waterings during spring and early summer.

